

# “Potluck Ethics”

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I grew up in the Kingston Unitarian Fellowship. Once a month after service, we had a potluck. The podium was removed from the table at the front of the room, and the table was swiftly full of platters and bowls. Everyone gathered round. We had just had a Sunday service, where we shared the joys and sorrows of our lives, sang songs of love and hope, and feasted on ideas and new ways of looking at the world. Once again, we had become religious community, and we were ready to go deeper with a shared meal.

My dad always brought his devilled eggs. They were his tried and true. He enjoyed making them, and they always went quickly (I can almost taste the yummy goodness right now). Someone always brought quinoa salad. There were bean salads, pasta salads, cheese plates. So many colours and flavours. For me as a child, it was simple abundance. We ate our fill, together.

I don't know if times were simpler then, or if complications were kept hidden under the quinoa salad, but now it's out in the open that potlucks are complicated. Hosting a dinner party is complicated. We can't all eat everything. Some of us don't do lactose. Some of us don't eat quinoa. Some of us will eat the pasta salad as long as it's gluten-free and doesn't have vinegar. Some of us can't do garlic. Some can't do nightshades. Some have a limited diet by choice, going paleo or sugar-free or vegan. Some of us are only comfortable with meat and potatoes. There is no one-size-fits-all. People are going to mix and match at the potluck table. People are going to examine, and hunt, and question, and doubt, at the potluck table. People are going to seek fulfillment and belonging at the potluck table, and not always find it.

Unitarian Universalism is a potluck religion. From our many and varied paths, we come together to create one shared experience. Perhaps you first came to our table because your previous church had an ingredient that didn't sit right with you (maybe there was a little too much small-mindedness in the doctrine). So you come to this table to give it a try. Perhaps you come to this table because there is something in you, an ingredient in who you are, that is too often not welcome in the places you go. So you come to this table to find out if this is a welcome table for the ingredients that make up you. Perhaps you come to this table because you believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations. You might have been to too many potlucks that have been dominated by potato salad (I'm not dissing potato salad. It's just an example!). Perhaps you have been to too many potlucks that have been dominated by potato salad, and you want to widen the circle to include all the ingredients of the world.

Unitarian Universalism is a potluck religion. We each bring something to contribute. We have wide varieties of opinion about the big questions of life, the universe and everything. Even when we agree that we want to move the world from A to B, we disagree about how to get there. There is not one theological dish that satisfies us all. We each bring our theological dish, or dishes. We love being part of theological plenty. And each Sunday morning is a surprise. What flavours will waft into our awareness?

What dish will we try for the first time, or try again for the first time, and discover that there is something there for us?

Unitarian Universalism is a potluck religion, but it is not an anything goes religion. Our mutuality, our way of being together, our way of creating potlucks together, is grounded in justice, is grounded in equity, is grounded in compassion. We agree that we believe in equity, even as we disagree about what equity looks like. We agree that we believe in equity, even as we might be focusing on different inequities in the world. We agree that we believe in equity, even as each of our views on equity might change depending on the context. We bring different views on equity to the potluck table, and then we do the work of equity.

When I worked at a retreat centre, we did the work of equity. We hosted groups of 20 to 100 people, and we wanted to be fair about how we fed people. We didn't always get it right, and I don't have any answers for you today, but I can offer a framework for working with the topic of equity. Food can be a charged topic - it effects your mood and your health - so it can add some sizzle to the discussion of equity.

There were four things that we did at this retreat centre in the name of equity.

#1. We labelled the food. Labelling the food shows that you care about people's sensitivities enough to give them a heads up. This contains garlic. That contains dairy. Labelling shows that you are aware that some people need this information in order to participate. Labelling the food also provides you with information: You might notice that all of the desserts contain dairy. Labelling can help you to see patterns, help you to see that in some way the circle isn't very wide.

Randall Monroe, of the comic strip xkcd, labelled Christmas songs by when they came out. He created a chart showing which decade each Christmas song came out (he chose the 20 most popular songs by airplay). One came out in the 1930s: Santa Claus Is Coming To Town. In the 1940s, there was Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Winter Wonderland, Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire, Let It Snow, Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas, and 2 others. In the 1950s, there was Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree, Jingle Bell Rock, Blue Christmas, Little Drummer Boy, I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus, Silver Bells, and 3 others. In the 1960s, there was Holly Jolly Christmas and It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year. In the 1970s, there was Feliz Navidad. If you look at the chart, it is a huge peak in the 1940s and 1950s. That's when today's most-played Christmas songs came out. The caption of the chart says, "Every year, [we] carefully recreate the Christmases of Baby Boomers' childhoods." If you are a baby boomer, at Christmas we sing songs from your childhood! You might have thought that some of these songs were timeless (and some of them are!), but these songs were made for you. Have yourself a baby boomer Christmas (I know, Christmas isn't about you, it's about the grandkids, and I love those songs as much as you do). Labelling songs helps us to see how wide the circle is. Labelling songs, or food, helps us to see beyond what we think is normal. Labelling vegetarian dishes on a menu helps us to see if there are enough vegetarian dishes. Labelling the references in my sermons helps me to see if I am drawing from a variety of races, genders, ages, beliefs, etc.

We try so hard not to label people. We try so hard to see each other as fellow humans. Yes indeed, let's see our common humanity, but if we only see our common humanity, we miss out on patterns that show how wide the circle actually is. The lasagna says, "Don't label me as Italian food. I'm food." Yes, and the spaghetti is just food, and the pizza is just food, and the ossobuco alla milanese is just food, but

if this isn't intended to be an Italian-themed potluck, it's helpful to apply the label and notice the pattern. Quinoa salad can be a marker of upper-middle class culture. What would happen if we look at Unitarian Universalist potlucks through the lens of class?

So that's the first way to approach equity: Label things.

The 2nd and 3rd ways to approach equity are opposites. The 2nd way is to ensure that there is something for everyone. Find out people's needs in advance, and if someone is coming who only eats broccoli, let them know that you'll provide several delicious broccoli dishes. Anticipate people's needs. As Rev Theresa Soto says, make people feel like "This space was made for me."

The 3rd way to approach equity is the opposite of that. The 3rd way is to say, you know better than me what you need, so you bring it. We had someone come to the retreat centre who only ate steak for dinner, so he brought steak. We supported him by having a rule that you could bring your own food, and we empowered people to use our facilities as needed. We gave discounts to people taking care of their own needs. We didn't leave people to fend for themselves. Rather we supported people by providing what they needed to help themselves. This can be disconnecting if it's taken too far, but empowering people is an important part of equity work. The Sunday service can't meet everyone's theological needs every Sunday, so the congregation encourages and supports members to create their own groups. A pagan grove, a Buddhist meditation group, a humanist group. It can be enticing to focus on solutions that make guarantees ("we -will- provide what you need") but taking responsibility for others needs to be balanced by empowering them. There is room for both social humanism and liberal humanism, as I spoke about on July 4th.

The 4th way to approach equity is to go all in. Decolonize the potluck! If you are vegan, and you're sick of being marginalized by carnivores, become the organizer of the potluck and make it a vegan potluck. At the retreat centre, we had an agenda: Simple, healthy vegetarian meals. If you came, that's what you were signing up for. At Unitarian youth weekends, they start by making a behaviour agreement. Things like, we agree to take space and make space, which means that we each commit to participating but not dominating the conversation. We each take space by expressing ourselves, and we each make space by so that there is room for others to talk. Have you ever been part of a group where someone dominated the conversation? It often doesn't work to just ask them individually to make space for others. Sometimes you need whole-group buy-in to change the culture. Just labelling the default culture doesn't work. Providing a bit more room around the edges for the shy people isn't enough. Sometimes you need to override the default culture and curate the equitable experience that you're looking for.

There is a shadow side to each of these approaches to equity. Labeling things can stir divisions. Empowering people can look like abandoning them. Taking over an event to curate it can attract people who want to wield power. There is no simple button to push to create equity. I don't have the answers that we crave.

Rev Natalie Fenimore says to develop a culture of practice. Not a culture of perfection, where you get equity right every time, because you won't. A culture of practice means that today you try an approach to equity, see how it goes, reflect on it, and then tomorrow try again.

I promise you this: If there is no room for you at the potluck, I would rather share a meal with you than join the potluck. If there is no room for you at the potluck, we will create an even better potluck. If there

is no room for you at the potluck, we will organize with everyone whose heart is in the game, to make room for you at the potluck, to make the potluck a potluck that was made for you.

We are dedicated, we are learning, we are changing. May we continue the practice of equity.